LET THE BLIND APPRECIATE YOUR ART

Bringing Tactile and Audio Art Prints to the Washington County Fine Arts Museum

SAMANTHA BALDWIN
University of Maryland

Project Description

The intent of this project is to make the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts (WCMFA) more accessible to the blind and visually impaired. Currently, WCMFA does not offer any resources that would allow those with visually disabilities to experience the art in the museum. Every item in the collection is behind glass or rope with a sign stating, "Do Not Touch." Introducing tactile prints would allow blind visitors to form their own thoughts, opinions, and conclusions about the art, rather than needing to rely on a guide, friend, or audio recording. 3DPhotoWorks provides 5ft x 10ft fine art tactile prints with sensors embedded throughout that, when touched, activate audio about that area of the print. A collection of these prints would open the WCMFA environment and make it more accessible for the visually impaired.

Statement of Need

The National Federation of the Blind reports that there are approximately 111,500 people with a visual disability in Maryland (2016). To be counted by the United States Bureau of the Census as having "significant vision loss" one must have "total or near-total blindness and 'trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses'"(National Federation of the Blind). There is a common misconception that people with visual disabilities cannot appreciate art because it is believed to be a purely visual concept. This is due to *Ocularcentrism,* a term coined by Martin Jay (1993) in his book *Downcast Eyes*. *Ocularcentrism* is the assumption that "society and the arts are primarily constructed on visual knowledge," which has "intrinsically excluded blind and visually impaired people from social and cultural activity and engagement since the birth of human visual knowledge" (Hayhoe, 2017, p.4). In his book, *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums*¸ Simon Hayhoe (2017) discusses how *ocularcentrism* is a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> *Ocularcentrism* becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in and of itself: that is to say, people design a society that is visibly aesthetic; people appreciate the aesthetic visually; subsequently, visual reproduction and evolution develop cultural tradition; in turn, this reproduction is replicated and becomes the social and cultural norm; this norm assumes that the person experiencing visual artworks primarily or only understands the visual artifact through a single organ (the eyes); and, as a result of this process, there is also the assumption that the visual artwork can only be appreciated and understood through perception alone (p.4).

The 'visual' arts can be appreciated and understood through more than perception alone, though, as Hayhoe goes on to discuss in his book with multiple case studies. People in the case studies who were both blind from birth and who had lost their sight later in life showed the ability to apply Bloom's Taxonomy to the artwork with which they interacted (pp.5-39). Knowing this, "we are now on the edge of a new form of the post-deficit model of blindness and a truer understanding of the holistic relationship of creative activity, picture comprehension, and a more complex notion of identity" (Hayhoe, 2017, p.43).

We want to ensure that the blind and visually impaired population of Washington County and Maryland can interact with the collections of cultural artifacts we possess. Currently, all our

collections are inaccessible to them. Security is posted in every room to remind visitors not to touch paintings. Most glasswork and sculptures are kept in glass cases, where the names are displayed on cardstock name plates. There are touchscreens in many of the rooms with no audio options. This project will be a steppingstone towards opening all our collections to the visually impaired populace.

Project Design

This project is a two-phase project, with the final phase being contingent on the outcome of phase 1. In Phase 1, the museum will license "The Marine and Tet- The Battle That Changed the Vietnam War," a travelling exhibit by 3DPhotoWorks, to be presented in the Groh Gallery. This collection includes 20 Fine Art Prints, 10 Tactile Prints, and 11 Recent Survivor Audio Interviews. The exhibit is available for licensing in 3-month intervals. 3DPhotoWorks works with leaders and volunteers from the blind community to develop "technology that makes educational and cultural information available to blind people" (2020a). They can convert "any 2-dimensional image to a 3-dimensional tactile fine art print. The prints have length, width, depth, and texture. Sensors are embedded throughout the prints that when touched, activate audio" (2020b). These prints can be enjoyed by both our blind visitors and our sighted visitors, as well.

Once the exhibit has been licensed, before it arrives, reach out to the National Federation of the Blind for possible marketing assistance. They are located less than an hour away in Baltimore, Maryland and would be a great resource during the time the museum has the exhibit displayed, not only for marketing, but as a potential partner in staff training and continued improvements.

During the time the exhibit is displayed, it is vital to track attendance statistics to determine the success of the exhibit:

1. How many patrons visited the Vietnam War Exhibit?
    a. Is this more or less than usually attend other exhibits in the Groh gallery at this time of year?
2. How many blind or visually impaired patrons visited the Vietnam War Exhibit?

When the exhibit leaves after 3 months, assess the statistics to determine whether the exhibit was a success in improving accessibility for the blind and visually impaired by increasing their attendance. If so, the museum can move on the Phase 2.

Phase 2 involves making our permanent collections accessible. To do this, we need we need to convert the art we do not let people touch to tactile prints. This will be best achieved one collection at a time to reduce costs. 3DPhotoWorks has prints available with and without audio sensors imbedded as another way to cut costs, however, prints with audio embedded offer a fuller experience for those with visual disabilities. Starting with the Schreiber Collection, order tactile conversions of the photographs and paintings in each collection from 3DPhotoWorks every 6 months to save money.

Timeline

Month 1: Partnership and Promotion

- Connect with the National Federation of the Blind to discuss marketing

Months 2,3 and 4: Launch Vietnam War Exhibit

- Install and launch "The Marines and Tet – The Battle That Changed the Vietnam War"
- Evaluate Attendance

Month 5: Determine Success of Vietnam War Exhibit

- Based on exhibit attendance, determine if the museum can afford to move forward with installing permanent tactile prints

Month 6: Purchase Tactile Prints for Schreiber Collection
Month 12: Purchase Tactile Prints for Kerstein Collection
Month 18: Purchase Tactile Prints for Smith Collection
Month 24: Purchase Tactile Prints for Singer Collection

Budget

Item Description	**Estimated Cost**
Tactile Vietnam Exhibit (3 months)	$15,000
Shipping	$400
Installation	$150
Marketing	$500
Tactile Print	$3,120/each*
Tactile Print w/ audio sensors	$6,240/each*

*John Olson, owner of 3DPhotoWorks, is offering a 35% discount to WCMFA for all tactile prints (J. Olson, personal communication, May 13, 2020).

Project Impact

By creating a museum environment that is more welcoming and accessible to people with visual disabilities, we allow them to become more active in the culture the art in our museums represents. The goal of this project is to end the passive exclusion of the blind by including tactile prints that can be enjoyed by both sighted and blind patrons. Once this project is complete, the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts will not only draw blind and visually impaired visitors from local areas, but also from the tri-state area because the use of tactile art in museums is still a rare, up-and-coming phenomenon, sometimes only being used in specialty museums for the blind. WCMFA can be a leader by being one of the first art museums to be all inclusive by including tactile art pieces within its permanent collections.

References

3DPhotoWorks. (2020a). Company Info. Retrieved from https://www.3dphotoworks.com/info

3DPhotoWorks. (2020b). Product. Retrieved from https://www.3dphotoworks.com/product

Hayhoe, S. (2017). *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

National Federation of the Blind. (2016). State Distribution. *Blind Statistics*. Retrieved from https://www.nfb.org/resources/blindness-statistics

National Federation of the Blind. *Blind Statistics*. Retrieve from https://www.nfb.org/resources/blindness-statistics

	FAIR	GOOD	EXCELLENT	POINTS EARNED/ NOTES
COVER PAGE **Author's Names**: Name(s) of the person(s) responsible for the project's conception and the attached proposal. **Project Title:** Creative and descriptive name; gives reader clear understanding of project's purpose.			**5 points** Cover page appears and contains: Author(s) name(s) Project title	5
Project Description: Brief description of project.	**3-6 points** Description **adequate** but could be strengthened in its explanation of proposed project.	**7-9 points** Description provides **solid** explanation of the proposed project.	**10 points** Description is **outstanding** and provides **exceptional** explanation of the proposed project.	10
Statement of Need: Justification for the proposed project as it relates to a particular need or challenge.	**5-9 points** Statement is **adequate** but could be strengthened in its justification for the proposed project.	**10-13 points** Statement provides **solid** justification for the proposed project.	**14-15 points** Statement is **outstanding** and provides **exceptional** justification for the proposed project.	15
Project Design: Proposed work plan and schedule of completion.	**16-25 points** Work plan is **adequate** but could be strengthened in its support for the proposed project.	**26-34 points** Work plan provides **solid** support for the proposed project.	**35-40 points** Work plan is **outstanding** and provides **exceptional** support for the proposed project.	35
Project Impact: Anticipated impact of the proposed work.	**5-9 points** Statement is **adequate** but could be strengthened in sharing rationale regarding potential impact of the proposed project.	**10-13 points** Statement provides **solid** rationale regarding potential impact of the proposed project.	**14-15 points** Statement is **outstanding** and provides **exceptional** rationale regarding potential impact of the proposed project.	10 I felt by the time I got to Project Impact I had already talk about the impact over and over, so I didn't have much else to say?
Budget: Costs associated with achieving stated outcomes and implementing project.	**3-6 points** Budget narrative is **adequate** but could be strengthened in its explanation of project related expenses.	**7-9 points** Budget narrative provides **solid** explanation of project related expenses.	**10 points** Budget narrative is **outstanding** and provides **exceptional** explanation of project related expenses.	10 I was particularly excited to get a chance to talk to the owner to 3DPhotoWorks for this project. A very interesting company. Though he was a little let down to learn it was a mock project
References: APA formatted list of all sources used to complete proposal.			**5 points** Reference list appears. **All** or **almost all** entries are correctly formatted.	5
			TOTAL	**90/100**